

Toward a Learning Commons

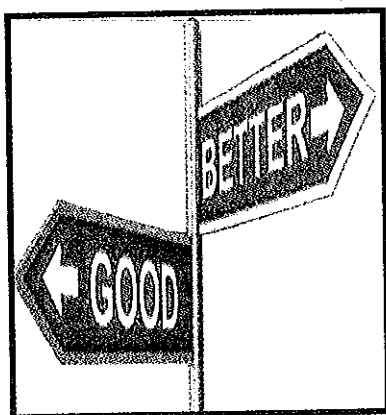
by PAMELA HARLAND

LAST WEEK, WHILE attending a library conference, I heard a librarian say, "You should ask for forgiveness, not for permission." I am not sure what she was specifically referring to, but I realized that that quote could serve as a leadership mantra for all librarians in the process of beginning a learning commons. I believe that starting a learning commons is certainly the right thing to do. Users will quickly find out how right it is. Why would you ask for permission to make small changes that will benefit you, the faculty, the students, parents, and administration at your school?

So, before you even think about asking permission from your principal or superintendent to make a change that will benefit the entire school community, begin on your own by taking the first couple of steps.

SMALL CHANGE, BIG SHIFT

Before changing any policies or procedures, however, ask yourself, "Why does my school need a library/librarian when they have access to so much information online?" As 21st-century librarians, we need to shift our way of thinking about library functions and resources in a fundamental



and profound way. We must stop the long-standing and much respected practice of preserving and protecting resources. We must instead move toward better ways of focusing on users' needs by trusting them, becoming more flexible, and reducing barriers to

resources and information. All of these steps require a change in traditional librarians' philosophy.

THE FIRST SMALL CHANGE MAY BE THE BIGGEST

Let students check out dictionaries (and other refer-

ence books). Forget about keeping your dictionaries on the reference shelves. In fact, forget about your print reference section completely. If users want to check out a dictionary for two weeks, why stop them? We should be thrilled that students want to take print dictionaries home with them! That is it. That one decision is user-centered (a



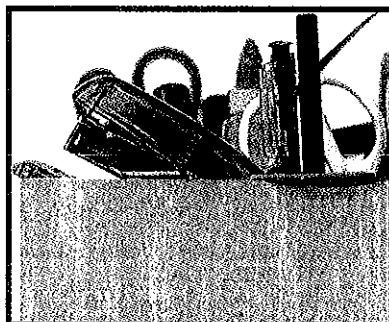
student-user wants to take a dictionary home), it is trusting (we trust that he/she will bring the much-used resource back undamaged), it is flexible (we just changed a long-standing rule that most libraries have by being flexible with policies), and a barrier has been reduced (print reference books may now be checked out). That one scenario explains a great deal of the learning commons model. I know it is a simplified example of how to make the change, but the learning commons philosophy is just that: simple. If you demolish your entire reference section by intershelving your reference books with the nonfiction, you will be well on your way toward leading your school to the learning commons. If you are not ready to entirely raze your reference collection, begin by pulling any titles that your students actually use (you can tell because they won't have as much dust on them) and putting those in a "ready reference" or "circulating reference" section and see what happens.

Once you get your mind set on providing unfettered access to resources for all of your users, you will be well on your way to establishing a learning commons. Focusing on the needs of the users, rather than on pre-existing policies or philosophies will transform every decision that you make. Users will respect you, value the service and resources that

you offer, and will see the significance of the learning commons in their daily lives at school.

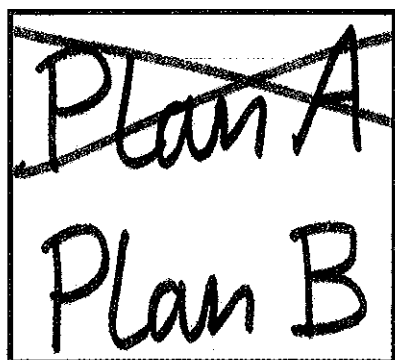
TRUST THE USERS

Maybe you are uncomfortable with offering unfettered access to library resources traditionally kept behind the counter. It is a natural reaction. For instance, you might hesitate before putting fifteen pairs of scissors out on your supply counter for students to use at their discretion. But, let's consider the commercial copy center model where on-demand access to all of the tools and resources needed to complete a project are always freely available. This model is all about access and convenience. It encourages users to complete projects. Start with a small supply table with a couple of essentials that students usually have to request, such as scissors or glue-sticks. Maybe you are worried about an increasing supplies budget because of loss or theft, but if you set expectations high and maintain accountability it will soon be obvious that resources are always there to be used responsibly.



FLEXIBILITY

Be flexible in library philosophy and user interaction. Flexibility is the key to success in the learning commons model. For example, some purchased ereaders are too big for school lockers and you may be getting too much break-



age. When funding comes through for more ereaders do you:

- a) standardize for its own sake,
- b) make a better choice for users, or
- c) not buy any because ereaders are too fragile?

The answer is obvious, but it's amazing how many times great librarians will choose (a) or (c). Flexibility is an essential component of the learning commons model and the mindset that supports it.

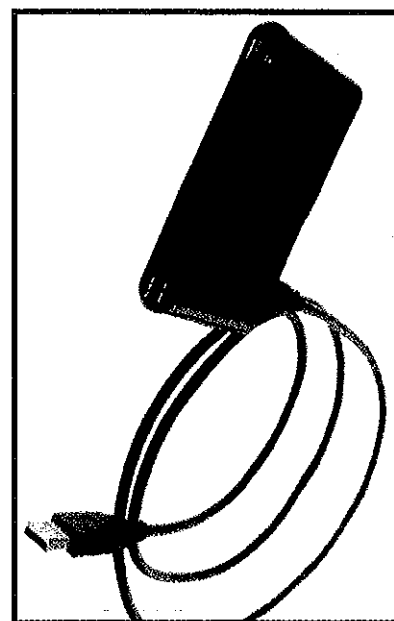
You can be flexible because this shift occurs in your mind, not in written policy.

BARRIERS TO INFORMATION

Now is a great time to think about how students ac-

cess all of the resources in the library. Are they frustrated or confused? Are they sometimes unsure of where to start and how to proceed? Are they unaware of the trusted resources that you have so thoughtfully selected for them to use? Do they use them? Or do they see barriers everywhere they turn? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you need to remove those barriers.

In your virtual library, create Web navigation resources that are assignment or course specific. Provide students and faculty with a list of passwords necessary for accessing these valuable resources. We set up a password-protected page on our blog and keep a current list of all library resource passwords there. Users only need to remember one simple password and they have access to countless online reference books, periodicals, databases, and other tools. In addition, try to make Internet resources as easy to access as possible by using simple and obvious Web design. Stop and think to yourself: If I was unfamiliar with these tools, would I be able to figure out where to go? Perhaps you need to add directions or print hand-outs for some users. Observe the students and talk with faculty members to find out what users need in order to easily access all of your virtual resources.



Virtual barriers are not the only problems in the 21st-century school library. If

you circulate electronic resources be sure to provide users with software, batteries, instructions, cables, memory cards, and flexible loan policies. In order for a student to create a finished product using a digital camera, he/she may need batteries, a memory card, a tripod, a carrying case, photo editing software, and a memory card reader. He or she may also need to borrow this equipment for a couple of days in order to fully utilize the functionality of the camera and paraphernalia. As we continue to increase our offerings in the way of technological equipment, we must be sure that we are not building barriers that prevent students from using them effectively.

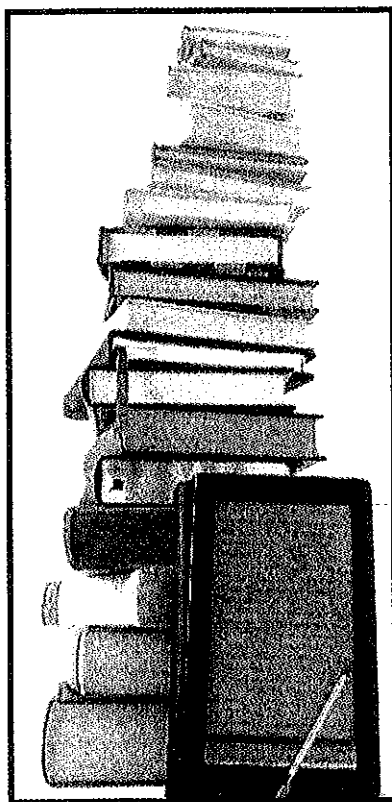
EREADERS

IN THE LEARNING COMMONS

Because technological innovations are happening so fast,

it is important for you to be a technology leader. Show the faculty how to integrate new research tools, ereaders, and digital voice recorders into the curriculum and be a technological leader with student users as well. Try out an ereader device at a department store or at a conference before users begin coming in with questions. Stay current by reading professional journals like *School Library Monthly* and books like *The Learning Commons: Seven Simple Steps to Transform Your Library* (Libraries Unlimited, 2010). Find the answers to these questions: Are the textbooks that your school uses currently available as electronic books? Can they be accessed by all of the ereading devices that you are considering? Is color display important to you? Or, is name brand recognition more important? Have an educated opinion about new devices and share that opinion with users.

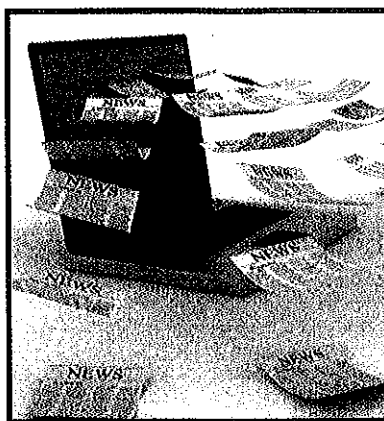
We all know librarians who do amazing research on the next great technological device, and then spend years trying to decide which tool to actually purchase. In order to see what works best for users, you've got to actually make a decision and buy one. There are worse things in the world than



purchasing an ereader that turns out to not have the most ideal functionality built in. But, what is one worse thing? Not buying an ereader at all! Once you've made a decision about ereaders and made the leap to purchase those first devices, be sure that users can check them out. Do not spend months evaluating the tool and fretting over policies and procedure. Instead, get the devices into the hands of users and ask for feedback. The best technology in the world, without

PUBLICIZE

access, is not useful to any school. The aim of these technological devices, and the information that they connect users to, is all about access. Make your lending policies liberal: allow students time to take the tools home and figure them out themselves. Give students ereader devices for the same amount of time that you would lend a book.



model, your job is not over. A vital step is to publicize what you have done. Write an article in the monthly school newsletter about a new service or tool. Publicize your resources over announcements or on your website. Most importantly, publish

a monthly library report in which you recognize events and activities that happened in the library. Be sure to include statistics, professional development opportunities, and curricular connections to classes. Point out new tools, resources, and services and fill the rest of the report with pictures of happy students using the learning commons. Include quotes from users and survey results in your monthly reports. Send copies to the administrators, the board of education, and the faculty. Librarians may not always excel at promotion of the library and its resources, however, the commons model requires that you publicize as much as possible via newsletter, email, blog, report, or website. Reach your stakeholders by any means necessary. Show them that you are taking the lead. ◀

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